**DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN IN WEST AFRICA: AN INTERROGATION**

**PAUL-SEWA THOVOETHIN (PhD)**

**Department of Political Science**

**Lagos State University**

**Ojo Campus**

**Lagos State**

**Nigeria**

**E-Mail:** [**paul-sewa.thovoethin@lasu.edu.ng**](mailto:paul-sewa.thovoethin@lasu.edu.ng)

**MICHAEL SONAYON AVOSETINYEN**

**Department of Political Science**

**Lagos State University of Education**

**Oto-Ijanikin Campus**

**Lagos State**

**Nigeria**

**E-Mail:** [**avosetinyenmichael@gmail.com**](mailto:avosetinyenmichael@gmail.com)

**&**

**MOSES DAMILOLA ISAAC**

**Department of Political Science**

**Lagos State University**

**Ojo Campus**

**Lagos State**

**Nigeria**

**ABSTRACT**

*Across the world, democracy either liberal (mostly in global north) or procedural (mostly in global south) has endured more than any other form of government. Aside the fact that in most countries in the global south democracy is at best procedural is also to understand that the global south especially the African continent has experienced more military coups than any other continent in the world. However, in the early 1990s and beyond after years of military rule countries in the West African region transit from military authoritarian regimes to democracy with the conduct of regular elections and the change from one government to another. Unfortunately, instead of making progress, democracy in the region got to a halt for almost two decades. Thus, West Africans become disillusioned with democracy. From this worrying failure of democracy in West Africa is the emergence of military coups in Mali in 2020, Guinea 2021, Burkina Faso 2022 and failed attempts in Niger and Guinea Bissau. Going by this, it is pertinent to understand why countries in the region which have once witnessed some level of democracy are gradually reversing to military rules. A better understanding of these reasons is necessary in order to address the challenges posed by the unexpected military take-over of government and the breakdown of democracy in West Africa, given the fact that there is no other better alternative to democracy across the world at least at the moment.*

**Keywords: Democratisation, Liberal, Procedural, Democratic Breakdown, Democratic Backsliding, Reversal, Decline, Military Coup.**

**Introduction**

The history of democratisation in Africa points to the fact that countries on the continent of Africa from the early 1990s have all ended military authoritarian rules in what was termed the Third Wave of democratisation on the continent. Interestingly, during this period no region on the continent embraced some level of democracy in the manner in which countries in the West African region did. In the West African region there were consistent elections and regular transitions. The common narrative then was that military rule has become a thing of the past in the region and democracy has come to stay.

However, it was not too long that the third wave of democratisation faced decline in Africa and most especially in the West African region. This democratic decline prompted the current resurgence of military coups in the region, which could be referred to as second wave of coups in Africa. This second wave of military rule in Africa started in Mali in 2020 followed by Guinea in 2021 and Burkina Faso in February 2022 and September 2022. There have been reported failed attempts in few other countries in the region, most notably Niger and Guinea Bissau (Sanni, 2022). Also of interest is that, within a year West Africa experienced three successful coups (two in Mali and in Guinea), and an arbitrary military transfer of power in Chad following the assassination of its president. In fact, the region has experienced more coups within two years than in any other region in Africa within the last one decade. What this democratic breakdown suggests is that the military coup may be dangerously back albeit in a new form in the region (Zeigler, 2021).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been confounded by this renewed wave, despite the regional body’s efforts in entrenching democracy in the region. With this latest development, pertinent questions to be asked therefore are: where did countries in the region got it wrong? What has been triggering the recent coups that have taken place in West Africa in recent years? How could this trend be addressed in order for it not to have contagion effects and return the region to the path of democracy? This work addresses these questions with a two-pronged strategy. First is the assessment of the reasons for democratic breakdown especially in West Africa, the second section focuses on how to halt democratic breakdown in West Africa and then the conclusion.

**Root Causes of Democratic Breakdown in West Africa**

Let us open our discourse under this section with two different scenarios under similar situation. When Sudanese General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan seized power from the transitional government meant to guide Sudan towards democracy in a coup, he was met with widespread outrage. The country`s capital Khartoum was filled with protestors, mass strikes, and street battles against the military, demanding a return of civilian leaders. But some few months later when the military seized power in Burkina Faso, it was met with cheering crowds. We illustrate these two different scenarios to suggest that there are different reasons behind democratic breakdown, especially in the global south. Thus, it is very safe to aver that different reasons account for democratic breakdown which require attention. Democratic breakdown merits concern due to the need to first understand reasons for discontent towards supposedly democratic regimes, in order to holistically address this prevailing problem. Understanding these reasons is vital to enhancing democracy that could gain the trust of the people (Hoffman, 2022) and which could serve as a guard against democratic breakdown. However, a cautious note must be given that there is no one-size fits all explanation for the breakdown of procedural democracy in the global south, but we shall examine breakdown as they reflect wider situation.

Birikorang and Salihu (2020) note that democracy has been interpreted and applied in different ways throughout Africa, as Africa’s political leaders seem averse to following established rules and engage in a less principled form of politics. It is this application of democracy in different ways, according to the whims of politicians and ruling elites that has caused significant discontent among many African people, hence an elixir for democratic breakdown. They further suggest that in a situation that large segments of the population in a country remain poor, and faith falters in the ability of civilian regimes to improve living standards and provide security, historical memories about the failures of military rule are likely to fade and it will once again become a plausible alternative. And as Barrack (2007) holds, the reason why most regime changes in the past were successful was due to the level of popular support, both at the local and the international levels.

In a similar manner, Onunaiju, (2022) argues that deepening and widespread poverty which is the corollary to wasteful human capital and arrested factor in national development; remain the essential obstacle to economic growth. He supports this line of argument by pushing this frontier of argument that fritting away resources to maintain rule-based democracy that do not challenge the productive base and unlock its potentials for sustainable growth, remain the most existential deficit of democratic rule in most emerging democracies. Similarly, (Esien *et al*, 2019) toe this line of argument that while democracy as a system of governance maintains widespread appeal, there has been a gap between expectations and delivered benefits which invariably affects survival of democracy. For Duzor & Williamson (2022) democratic breakdown have become increasingly limited to the poorest countries in the world, and the recent wave of coups fits into that. Using a World Bank 2021 estimate they support their claim by pointing out that Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Chad which have experienced breakdown of democracy all had less than $20 billion in GDP in 2020. This is also similar to the poverty rate statistic of Burkina Faso which is put at 43.8 per cent, Mali (41.9 per cent), Sudan (55.6 per cent), Guinea (36.1 per cent), Niger (45.4 per cent) and Chad (42 per cent), which provides a correlation between poverty rate and democratic breakdown (Daily Trust, 2022).

López and Luna (2021) also identify inequality and attitudinal change in society as predictors for democratic breakdown. Further studies show that economic inequality makes it easier for elites to dominate legislative bodies (Gilens 2012; Gilens 2020) and policy (Bartels 2016; Kelly 2020). Thus, inequality undermines citizenship rights, which make repression more effective against minorities and the poor (Cole 2018; López 2020). These dynamics slowly erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions while predisposing increasingly large electoral constituencies against “the establishment”.

In the opinion of Hoffman (2022) countries could also face breakdown of democracy in a situation where there are dissatisfaction with security deterioration, the corrupt and undemocratic actions of some elected officials, and international support systems that are more focused on counterterrorism and maintaining a certain status quo than on encouraging democratic governance. Using the West Africa region as example he underscores the fact that one of the principal points of contention in much of the countries in the region, especially in countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, is the perception that these governments are incapable of protecting their people from Islamist terrorist violence plaguing the region. Sanni (2022), corroborate this position by positing that social discontent is always a factor in the forceful takeover of government by military juntas.

Hoffman (2022) in another dimension holds that transitions from below in which democracy is as a result of agitation from the people are always plagued with a high degree of uncertainty and are likely to fail. He contends that transitions from above are more promising in terms of their ability to "deliver" democracy, because they tend to be more specific about their time frame, procedural steps, and overall strategy. Therefore, in countries where transitions occurred as a result of agitation from the populace will remain compromised as soon as incumbents settle down in power and would want to use non-democratic means to hold to power which would lead to further agitation that might lead to the breakdown of democracy.

Having identified different causes of democratic breakdown, it is pertinent to establish that remote and immediate causes of democratic breakdown are not exhaustive and they cannot be used to explain all cases of breakdown of democracy. What we have however done is to identify important reasons why democracy could experience breakdown and in similar manner how democracy could survive over time. Reasons identified under this section are quite enough to explain recent experience of military coups in some countries West Africa. These reasons could also be used to predict the fact that other countries in the region could experience more military coups, hence democratic breakdown. In view of this, there is the compelling need to take into cognisance these indices of democratic failure if democratic breakdown must be addressed in West Africa.

**Halting Democratic Breakdown in West Africa: The Way Forward**

While it would be surprising to see such high levels of coups continuing, we are certain the coming years will see coups in higher numbers than what we had become accustomed to. The underlying causes of coups are present and worsening. Until these domestic dynamics improve, or regional or global actors can provide a solution, there is no reason to think coups should go away (Duzor & Williamson, 2022:12).

This seemingly pessimistic position of Duzor and Williamson (2022) on coups in West Africa is to a very large extent right because it is becoming clearer that most West Africans are increasingly loosing trust in democracy, with the believe that democracy could not offer the dividends they so much desired. In fact, in a survey conducted across 18 African countries by Afrobarometer in 2019/2020 only four in 10 Africans (42%) believe that their elections work well to ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the view of voters and to enable voters to remove leaders who do not do what the people want (Afrobarometer, 2021). The implication of this is that most Africans have lost trust in democracy. According to Adekoya (2021), it is not that Africans no longer want to choose their leaders via elections, it is simply that many now believe that democracy has not lived up to expectations. There is therefore the need to reverse this trend, since there is no alternative to democracy at the moment.

Though, regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended membership of countries in which coup occurred in West Africa and have imposed sanctions on them, but, while the international condemnations of coups in these countries and the imposition of sanctions are crucial as deterrents to other would-be power grabbers, they are not enough to prevent democratic breakdown in the region. Therefore, reversing this trend and further enthronement of democracy especially in West Africa requires more pragmatic options. This section of the work is devoted to examining robust options available to West African countries in addressing this democratic breakdown.

The first step in this process is to create a regional consensus on good governance that clarifies the regional standards of democracy and which robustly strengthens all aspects of democratic rule. Going by this, there is the need to downplay mere organising periodic elections while ignoring or downplaying other elements of democracy, such as “free press, freedom from political repression or human rights (Hoffman, 2022). Thus, regional bodies like ECOWAS which has had successes in creating a vague democratic consensus need to improve on number of areas. Most importantly they must denounce all undemocratic measures and acts by governments in the region, including and especially elected civilian officials. This can include taking steps to guide against tampering with constitutions, extending term limits, and corruption.

Moreover, there is the need to shift focus on achieving a short duration of post-coup transition and focus more on the quality of transitions in West African countries (Sany & Verjee, 2022). Past experience has shown that whenever coups take place, the international response has focused narrowly on the deadline by which the military who seized power in a coup must allow the holding of elections for a return of their country to democratic rule. In as much that the duration is an important effort, but it needs to be backed-up with the content of the transition. That is, the way in which such transition strengthens democracy. The general believe and as we have stated earlier is that any country that suffers a military coup is as a result of democratic failure. In view of this, shaping the transition must begin with understanding why and how that failure occurred. Then, the transition period must be a period for course correction. As Sany and Verjee further suggests the transitional period following any coup must lay out the road map for the changes that are required in that country to strengthen democracy. This roadmap needs to include milestones to identify the essential steps and to set goals for when they should be achieved.

Sany and Verjee (2022) succinctly point out that to lay out this road map, there is the need to gather representatives of the citizenry, the security forces, all of the stakeholders for a conversation about their goals for the country — and what agenda for action is required to achieve those goals. According to them achieving this dialogue during a post-coup transition is what can produce the agenda for action that will truly strengthen democracy in a country in which a coup has occurred. Creating this national agenda refocuses that election around *issues*, rather than around *personalities*.

Furthermore, in order to help countries transition from military rule to more enduring civilian governance, policies need to include support for civil society and the inclusion of groups that have been excluded from power or governance in the past. This will go a long way in addressing the Zero-Sum politics that has become an elixir for crisis and fierce political contestation in the West African region (Sany & Verjee, 2022). Mauritius is a good example of this type of arrangement in which the "best losers" are reserved seats in parliament, they do not lose everything, a fact that, to some extent, reduces the zero-sum game and the country remains one of the very few democratic countries on the continent.

More so, focus both regionally and internationally needs to be shifted to strengthening and defending the institutions and norms that are required for democracies to function outside of just elections. This can include mitigating low voter turnout, corruption, elites out of touch with the people, and state-sanctioned repression, and encouraging an independent press, human rights, freedom of expression, and improvements in education (Hoffman, 2022). Additionally sanctions need not be applied only when the military takeover has occurred but should also be applied to States where civilian authorities fail to abide by democratic principles, especially in cases of elongation of tenure and corruption (Birikorang and Naila Salihu, 2020).

As Onunaiju (2022) suggests, if civil political process with its grand rules and norms is not able to generate the necessary momentum to fill the gap of productivity and innovation, enabling the sub-region to become a hub or workshop of creativity and value-multiplying enterprises, its democracy cannot be secured. More so, mere virtue of playing to the rules which bring benefits only to the players, leaving the mass of the people as mere spectators, whose enthusiasm is bound to wane as they become increasingly buffeted by hunger, misery and exposure to violent deaths will ultimately lead to democratic breakdown. Therefore, for democracy to survive there is the need for it to be result-oriented and substantive so that it does not just become a machine to promote the political class to good life of privileges, entitlements and opulence but a mechanism to process inclusive and qualitative improvements in the living conditions of the people. A substantive democratic process that is focused on problem solving, which must give the people, the sense of social and civic worth to be citizens and not just mere periodic electorates.

For Onanaiju (2022) for democracy to survive it must have the ability to deliver on poverty alleviation and reductions, access to quality health, education and other basic amenities. Achieving all these depend on the commitment by the ruling elite of the various countries to innovate economic policy that gives scope to optimising productivity in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) would find its job of superintending democracy in the region easier, if it shifts its major focus from who is breaching the rule of democracy to how democracy is delivering on the basic needs of the people and spurring them to contribute to the growth and expansion of the economies in the sub-region.

To enhance democracy, especially in West Africa, there is the need for a paradigm shift in the way political leaders conduct their affairs in the region. West Africa’s political leaders must engage themselves in a reality check to admit how they have failed Africans and created the fertile soil for coups. Doing this would assist them in developing their economies through regional economic cooperation that will help in rejuvenating the region’s economy (Daily Trust, 2022). This suggestion is premised on the fact that only the delivery of democratic dividends that can adequately sustain democracy.

There is also the need for countries in the West to partner with West African countries in discouraging undemocratic seizure of power in the manner in which they contributed in enhancing the third wave of democratisation in Africa. Western countries should unequivocally demonstrate that coups are no longer tolerated in West Africa. If this is not done there is the likelihood that military will be more willing to overthrow democratically elected presidents. More so, the international community has the ability to promote post-coup democratic transitions by making coup leaders to return to democracy when consider the costs associated with trying to retain power. Powell (2021) supports this line of argument by positing that transitions in Africa are largely the product of international pressure. He further stated that the ability of the African Union (AU) to pressure military rulers to relinquish power hinges on the influence of other actors with close ties to affected states. Enhanced collaborations, both formal and informal between regional organisations and those Western countries that have closer relations with coup afflicted countries can be more effective means of pressurising military rulers to relinquish power, through effective transition.

It is not expected that going by recent reversal of democratic gains in West Africa there could be overnight march towards liberal democracy in the region. However, with the suggestions offered under this section it is hoped that countries in the West African region will gradually move more towards proper democratisation, since democracy remains the only game in town.

**Conclusion**

As argued under this work, recent military interventions in politics in some countries in the West African sub-region have become worrisome, because it is an indication of the lost of democratic gains achieved during the third wave of democratisation in Africa. Across the world experience of military intervention in politics and immediate breakdown of democracy has shown that military coups are largely antithesis of democracy. Military has never and can never be an alternative to democracy.

However, as further posited under this work democratic breakdown do not occur without some contributory endogenous as well as exogenous reasons and factors. Some of these identified root causes of democratic breakdown especially in the West African region include the application of democracy in different ways according to the whims of politicians and ruling elites, deepening and widespread poverty caused by failure of democracy in addressing the need of the people and inequalities and attitudinal change in society. Other underlining reasons for democratic breakdown include dissatisfaction with security deterioration, the corrupt and undemocratic actions of some elected officials, politics assuming a zero-sum game, inability to manage different ethnic variables in plural societies, etc.

In view of the fact that military rule is not an alternative to democracy, there is therefore the need to avert future coups and respond to current ones in West Africa, in such a way that there would be a radical change of direction. Countries, with the help of regional and global partners, must address governance deficits in the form of non-fulfilment of the basic tenets of democracy, socio-economic frustration, and growing insecurity. More so, regional and continental bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) respectively must be firm and unbiased in their show of contempt for all types of bad governance and undemocratic change of government. International avenues for punishing military adventurists in power must be supported by global powers. Global intergovernmental bodies must equally check and African regional organisations must resist attitudes of political class which are largely antithetical to democracy.

**References**

Adekoya, R. (2021), ‘Why are Coups Making a Comeback in Africa’ *CNN*

Akinola, A. (2022), ‘Military Coups and Democratic Reversals in Africa’, *Cape Augus*

Anna Lührmann, A. & Lindberg, S. (2019), ‘A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?’, *Democratisation*, Vol. 26 No. 7

Barrack, S. (2007), Military Coup in the Post-Cold War Era: Pakistan, Ecuador and Venezuela’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1

Bartels, M. (2016), *Unequal Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Bermeo, N. (2016) ‘On Democratic Backsliding’ *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27 Issue 1

Birikorang, E. & Salihu, N. (2020), ‘Revisiting the Trajectory of Regime Change in Africa – The Case of Mali’, *Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre Policy Brief* 8

Cole, M. (2018), ‘Poor and Powerless: Economic and Political Inequality in Cross-National Perspective’, *International Sociology* Vol. 33 No. 3

Duzor M & Williamson, B. (2022), ‘Coups in Africa’,VOA News

Dwyer, M. (2017),*Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa****,*** Oxford, Oxford University Press

Gilens M. (2012), *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in Americ. Princeton*, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hoffan, J. (2022), ‘Cheering For Coups: Why Democracy in West Africa Is Faltering’, *The Organisation for World Peace*

Kelly, J. (2020), *America’s Inequality Trap*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kpundeh, J. (1992), ‘Democratisation in Africa: African Views, African Voices’, *National Research Council*

Linzer, I. (2020), ‘West Africa's Democratic Progress is Slipping Away, Even as Region's Significance Grows’, Just Security

López, M. & Luna, J. (2021), ‘Assessing the Risk of Democratic Reversal in the United States: A Reply to Kurt Weyland’, *American Political Science Association*

López, M. (2020), “State Segmentation and Democratic Survival in Latin America,” *American Behavioural Scientist,* Vol. 64 No. 9

Norman, E, Kenealy A, Corke S, Taussig T, & Polyakova, A. (2019), ‘The Democracy Playbook: Preventing and Reversing Democratic Backsliding’, *Governance Studies*

Onunaiju, C. (2022), ‘West Africa: Democracy and military rule’, *Viewpoint*

Powell, J. (2021), ‘A New Coup Era for Africa’, *Conflict Trends*, Volume 4

Przeworski, A. (2012), *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well Being in the World, 1950 to 1990*, Cambridge University Press

Sanni, K. (2022), ‘How corruption fuels coup d’état in African countries’ *Premium Times* – ICPC

Sany, J. & Verjee, A. (2022), ‘Countering Coups: How to Help Rebuild Democratic Rule’

Thovoethin, P.S and Avosetinyen, M. S (2016) Democracy under Emerging One-Party Dominant Systems in Africa: What Manner of Democracy?’ *African Journal of Democracy and Governance*, Vol. 3/1 & 2. *USIP*

Waldner, D & Lust, E. (2018), **‘**Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 21 Issue 1

Zeigler, S. (2021), ‘Are Military Coups Back in Style in Africa?’ *Commentar*yNewspaperDaily Trust, Sun, 06 February, 2022

Democracy and Development

Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990

# Democracy and Development

## Political Institutions and Well-Being in the W